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IV.—STREET TRADES AND REFORMATORIES

BY RICHARD K. CONANT,
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A little while ago, at a hearing in Massachusetts on the night messenger bill, the manager of one of the companies said that he had been connected with the messenger service thirty-seven years, and had never seen any of the horrible conditions which our evidence absolutely proved, and, furthermore, that in his opinion there was very little difference between the conditions in the night messenger service and conditions in a high school. There is, however, considerable difference, and it is just these conditions that lead street traders in the night messenger service and in the other forms of street trading into reformatories.

What is the meaning of the amazing statistics which we gather from reformatories? Out of 336 boys, for instance, in the Lyman School, 110 were former peddlers on the street; 160 had been newsboys; 72 had been bootblacks, and 56 had been messengers.

In the Parental School, another Massachusetts reformatory, out of 112 boys, 89 had been newsboys, 52 peddlers, 22 bootblacks, and 9 messengers; a number in total larger than the number of the boys in the reformatory, because some of the boys had engaged in more than one of the occupations.

Is it the actual work? Does work lead to the reformatory? It cannot be that. Every true advocate of child labor reform praises good, honest, hard, tiring work as roundly as he denounces the toil of those nine-year-old children who climb up on their dangerous playthings in the cotton factories.

No, it is not the hard, tiring work of the children that any child labor reformer can contend against. It is the conditions under which the work is done, which accompany the work, giving chance for mischievous boyish tendencies to sprout into vicious tendencies.

In the night messenger service the boys feel themselves above the law. That is probably the service in which the most independence has been cultivated. A little messenger boy walking along the

street, about twelve o'clock at night, was telling us of his visits to houses of ill fame, and kitchen bar-rooms. We asked him if he was not afraid of the police. He pulled his cap off and showed us his badge, saying: "De cops can't touch us when we got dis badge on." And so it is the independence which gives them a chance in the moments when they are not actively at work to cultivate the vicious tendencies which lead to the reformatory.

This independence is peculiar to the street trades. The mills do not directly send people to the reformatories. They repress the children, repress all the mischief, or tire it out so that there is not much chance in the idle moments, while the child is working eleven hours a day in the mill, for him to get on the path to the reformatory. Indirectly, however, in Massachusetts at least, we find that the mills do lead to the reformatory by ruining many boys at an early age, making doffers of them when they have no education, no industrial training. Without ability to progress to more skillful work in the mill, boys are thrown upon the streets at sixteen or seventeen when they become too old to doff. In the city of Lawrence, large numbers of these boys are thrown upon the streets and become part of the street gang.

It is not the work of selling the newspaper or of carrying the telegram that does the harm. Many boys—probably the larger number—in the newspaper service at any rate, are benefited by the actual work. A boy whom I met recently is one of the justices of the Newsboys' Court in Boston, just established. The judges are the newsboys themselves. They act under the direction of the Juvenile Court and sentence the boys themselves: self-government. And this bright, fifteen-year-old boy, has been cared for in good home surroundings and the hard work has benefited him. He is a keen, intelligent lad. He is doing all he can to keep the younger boys and his friends from going into the night messenger service, and to get them work under good conditions. His one ambition is to be a forester, and to get away from the city.

And so it seems to me that the point of attack is not to stop the work, but to regulate it, to put it under good conditions; and where good conditions cannot be had, as in the late hours of the night messenger service or the late work of street trading, then, as the final resort, prohibit the work.

There is another phase of the question of street trades and

reformatories—the question whether the reformatory is the proper cure or remedy for the wayward street trader. Of course, in the most depraved cases in the night messenger service, the boy must land in the reformatory or in jail, thanks to the sad condition of society which has allowed these evils to go on. But for the minor offences, for violation of the license regulations, failing to wear the badge displayed, and all those things, it would be foolish to send the minor offender into the reformatory with the older and more depraved offender. In this connection, the Newsboys' Court that has been established in Boston offers a most admirable suggestion. One of the justices is a lawyer who has always taken a great interest in children. The other two are newsboys. They manage their court in a rather informal manner; but they judge each case fairly after hearing the arguments. They take time to consider the merits of the boy's case, and understand better than do a great many judges the difficulties with which the boy has had to contend, and can suggest the proper punishment.

I hope that more and more street traders will be corrected in their early careers by the light fines, and the publicity among newsboys which is given by this court, and that more and more they will be kept from the reformatories so that they may be saved from contact with the more depraved offenders.